Alondra Nelson
Can Science Have Progressive Goals?

Alondra Nelson, Associate Professor of Sociology at Columbia, spoke to us about DNA testing in African American communities. She framed her talk with articles from Nicholas Wade and Craig Venter that argued that genomics has not lived up to its original hype. Nelson said that despite these pronouncements there is currently a lot going on in genomics outside of medicine. She suggested that the logics of DNA analysis have made their way into our culture as social and political technologies.

Nelson used the popularity of the genetic ancestry testing company “African Ancestry” as her primary example. When she conducted her fieldwork, Nelson was interested in “how and why African Americans would put their DNA in an envelope and send it to a stranger,” especially given the vulnerability of African American communities in the history of American biomedical institutions. She found that “African Ancestry” appealed to pre-existing genealogical organizations, whose members were mainly middle class women, ages 50+ engaged in practices of “kin keeping.” In this context Nelson became interested in what she calls “the social life of DNA,” the way that DNA and genetic technologies takes on meaning in social worlds. “The social life of DNA” serves as a reminder that genetic technologies are not only one thing (e.g. bio-informatic technologies tied to histories of oppression) but take on different political possibilities in different historical and social contexts.

Nelson also found that African American consumers were drawn to “African Ancestry” because of the involvement of a scientist named Rick Kittles. Early in his career Kittles had been instrumental in contesting how the remains in an African American burial ground in Lower Manhattan were classified. Familiar with the racism in the history of physiology, Kittles believed the remains should be analyzed for what he framed as their “ethnic” origins not their race. This earned Kittles the trust of African American communities; Nelson referred to him as an “authentic expert”—someone who is seen as authentically holding African American values and is a scientific expert by way of his training and standing in scientific communities. Her discussion of Kittles foregrounded how authenticity and expertise make ancestry testing a viable option for kin-making in African American communities, and how critiques of scientific racism have shaped biological categories (e.g., the use of ethnicity instead of race) and scientific practices of classification, creating new ways of constructing biological kinship.

In the final part of her talk, Nelson discussed how genetic technologies were being imbricated into issues of racial slavery and cultural memory. In the case Farmer-Paellmann v. FleetBoston, which sought reparations for descendants of slaves who were bought and sold by a private corporation, genetic ancestry testing was used to constitute proof of slave ancestry. This evidence did not prove substantive, however, because the court drew a distinction between genetic and genealogical connection, arguing that the plaintiffs needed to prove the latter. The
other example raised by Nelson was the Leon H Sullivan Foundation, which has argued that African Americans and Africans share a linked fate. In the context of genetic technologies they have argued that African Americans should target their philanthropy to the groups they are genetically connected to. These two cases offered examples of people enrolling genetic technologies in their political initiatives, claiming kinship (to slaves and African communities) that was otherwise unknown or denied to them with other kinds of evidence. Nelson ended on these examples to bring us to her central question: “can science have progressive goals?” If ancestry tests have been creating new kinds of kinship that can serve as a basis for forming political identities, are there ways to develop these potentialities further and in different directions?

Herman Gray, Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz, acted as a respondent to Nelson’s talk. He was curious about what relationships between individuals and collectives are made in the practice of genetic ancestry tests: What kinds of imagined communities (Benedict Anderson) do they create? How are these communities formed? And how do they foster a sense of belonging? Gray wondered about authority and expertise in the cases laid out by Nelson: What is the relationship between legitimization and expert knowledge? What is the nature of people’s claims on experts? And how do people become implicated in state projects—in particular, neoliberal ones that emphasize individual responsibility—in these configurations of science and expertise? What kind of politics—if any—are possible in these sorts of state projects? Finally, drawing on critical race theorist Saddiya Hartman, Gray asked what kinds of genealogical fantasies are created through the practice of genetic ancestry testing. In Gray’s response, he expressed more trepidation than Nelson about the political potentials of genetic testing. He felt that the desire for ancestry testing in African American communities played into the forms of individualism encouraged in American society and relied on outside expertise to make authoritative knowledge claims.

In her response to Gray, Nelson emphasized that genetics is never only about the individual, but is a basis for affiliation. She returned to Rick Kittles, whom she characterized as having a special kind of post-Civil-Rights expertise. Nelson also took the opportunity to flesh out her concept of “the social life of DNA,” which she defined as an analytic that understands that there are different spheres with different stakes in genetic technologies, but they co-authorize one another. She also emphasized that genetic ancestry testing is a kind of politics, if we are to define politics as people trying to make change. In this way Nelson endeavored to take seriously the political and scientific desires of the people she interviewed rather than explaining them away as motivated by unconscious ideologies.

During the Q&A, Ed Green asked if African American consumers were satisfied with their test results, because he did not feel he got useful ancestry information from his own genetic testing; the time-scale was too large. Whitney Boesel followed up on this question later by asking about the relationship between ancestry information and medical information; did people who wanted ancestry tests also want medical information? Lisa Petrella was curious about what Nelson meant by “progressive”—is it about political or scientific progress? Megan Moodie wondered what the connections and disconnections between African Americans’ interest in ancestry tests and
Mormons’. Max Tabatchnik asked how African American communities understand the difference between race and ethnicity in the context of Rick Kittles and the politics of these biological categories in general. Continuing the theme of political possibilities, Jenny Reardon asked what kind of stories produced something as politically “actionable” in this context. Pierre du Plasiss and Herman Gray were curious about the difference between a politics of recognition and a politics of representation. Through the audience questions and Alondra Nelson’s thoughtful responses, questions of political and scientific categories, community and identity, authenticity and expertise, arose in their specific relationships to violent histories (slavery and scientific racism). Without answering the question “can science have progressive goals?” Nelson presented a complex landscape where different communities have incorporated genetic technologies into their practices of making community and telling histories. Staying true to the political yearnings of her interview/ethnographic subject, while asking questions from critical race theory and Science and Technology Studies, Nelson provided compelling ways to approach the complexities of doing politics with and through emerging technologies.